

VZCZCXRO7052
OO RUEHROV
DE RUEHNR #0800/01 1130800
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 230800Z APR 09
FM AMEMBASSY NAIROBI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9277
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE
RUEHDR/AMEMBASSY DAR ES SALAAM 6490
RUEHDJ/AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI 0104
RHMFIUU/CJTF HOA
RUZEFAA/CDR USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE
RUZEFAA/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NAIROBI 000800

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR DS/IP/AF, DS/TIA/ITA, DS/DSS/OSAC

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ASEC](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KCRM](#) [CASC](#) [KE](#)

SUBJECT: MUNGIKI-INSPIRED VIOLENCE HITS CENTRAL PROVINCE

SUMMARY

1. Violence erupted in Karatina town and surrounding communities in Central Province after local residents resisted moves by the Mungiki criminal organization to force payment of a monthly levy on local residents and businessmen for "protection." Despairing that police were unable or unwilling to protect them, the local community organized vigilante attacks on suspected Mungiki members in early April, killing 15 people. In response, Mungiki organized on April 20 a counter-action in a neighboring village, killing 24 residents, according to police contacts. The President has ordered the Ministry of Internal Security and Provincial Administration to conduct a probe of the killings to determine the root causes to prevent further outbreaks of violence. However, tensions between local communities caught between rising food prices and the Mungiki's attempt to expand its extortion activities into new locations and sectors could cause further violence. End Summary.

THE MUNGIKI MOVE INTO KARATINA SPURS VIGILANTE ACTION

2. The Mungiki criminal organization was started in the mid-1980s as a religious revival movement, seeking to bring the Kikuyu tribe back to its traditional religious beliefs. Drawing heavily on the anti-colonial Mau Mau uprising for inspiration, it appealed to the young and dispossessed. However, the movement eventually turned into a feared criminal organization running extortion rackets mainly focused on the public transport sector and collecting fees for illegal water and electricity hookups in slums. It is also known for oathing its members and violent retribution against those who resist its demands or attempt to leave or inform on the organization.

3. The Mungiki traditionally have not been active in the town of Karatina and other towns close to the provincial capital of Nyeri in Central Province. However, Mungiki members recently came into Karatina and established an extortion racket in the public transport sector. Residents initially did not resist the movement. According to press reports, Mungiki plans to impose a levy on local residents and businessmen for "protection" and public frustration with the lack of police response to the Mungiki caused the local community to resort to vigilante action. During the first two weeks of April, groups of residents burnt houses where suspected Mungiki members lived and violently attacked suspected Mungiki members. Local press reported that 15 suspected Mungiki members were killed in the violence.

MUNGIKI REVENGE ATTACK

¶4. On the night of April 20, the Mungiki planned and executed a revenge attack in a village in East Nyeri district. According to press reports, machete-wielding Mungiki members launched a nighttime raid in Gataithi village, hacking to death a number of male residents. Police contacts put the number dead at 24, and stated that 39 suspects had been arrested. Press reports noted 29 dead and 63 suspects arrested.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

¶5. According to police contacts, tension in the area remains high. The Kenya Police Service has increased the number of officers in the area and deployed its General Services Unit (a SWAT-type rapid response unit). The Administration Police has also increased its presence in the area. On April 21, President Mwai Kibaki ordered the Minister of Internal Security and Provincial Administration, George Saitoti, to conduct an inquiry into the events to prevent further violence. Saitoti and Prime Minister Raila Odinga visited the area on April 22. The visit may help calm the situation.

OUR RESPONSE

¶6. The Regional Security Office (RSO) reached out to its police contacts on April 21 after hearing of the violence. The same day RSO sent an SMS message to the Embassy community, Overseas Security Advisory Council, international

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schools, and consular wardens advising that travel to the area should be avoided. RSO also contacted the Peace Corps to determine the status of the four volunteers deployed to the area around Karatina. All were either in Nairobi in training or on leave. RSO advised Peace Corps that the volunteers should not redeploy to the area for several days to allow a determination of the situation on the ground. On April 22, RSO sent a further e-mail and SMS stating that tensions remain high and recommending that travel to the area be avoided. We will continue to monitor the situation.

COMMENT

¶7. The violence in Karatina is not ethnically motivated. However, tensions between local communities caught between rising food prices and the Mungiki's attempt to expand its extortion activities into new locations and sectors could cause further conflict in Central Province. We will continue to follow developments closely. Per previous reporting the police have been accused of extrajudicial killings of Mungiki gang members. There is now a chorus of voices from civil society calling for swift police action (within the rule of law). The government (and police response) will be closely watched by all. End Comment.
RANNEBERGER